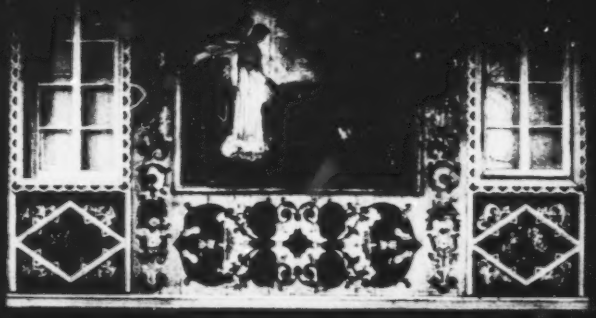
CHURCH OF OUR LADY of GOOD HOPE

FORT GOOD HOPE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES



Janet Wright

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Available in Canada through authorized bookstore agents and other bookstores, or by mail from the Canadian Government Publishing Centre, Supply and Services Canada, Hull, Quebec, Canada K1A 0S9.

La traduction française s'intitule *Église Notre-Dame-de-Bonne-Espérance Fort Good Hope, Territoires du Nord-Ouest* (nº de catalogue R64-169/1986F). En vente au Canada par l'entremise de nos agents libraires agréés et autres librairies, ou par la poste au Centre d'édition du gouvernement du Canada, Approvisionnements et Services Canada, Hull, Québec, Canada K1A 0S9.

Price Canada: $3.00
Price other countries: $3.60
Price subject to change without notice.

Catalogue No.: R64-169/1986E
ISBN: 0-660-12040-2

Published under the authority
of the Minister of the Environment,
Ottawa, 1986.

Editor: Paula Irving
Design: James Miller

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and not necessarily those of Environment Canada.

Parks Canada publishes the results of its research in archaeology, architecture and history. A list of titles is available from Research Publications, Parks Canada, 1600 Liverpool Court, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 1G2

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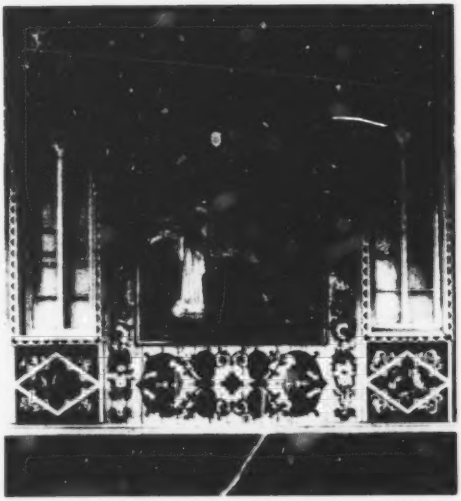

Janet Wright

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CHURCH OF OUR LADY *of* GOOD HOPE

Begun in 1865 and largely completed by 1885, this building influenced the design of later Oblate mission churches in western Canada. It is one of the oldest surviving buildings of this type and its design, particularly the interior detail, offers a fine and unique example of church decoration in the northwest. The building is further distinguished by its association with Father Émile Petitot, renowned ethnologist, linguist and geographer of the Canadian northwest, who lived at the mission from 1864 until 1878 and was responsible for the design and the partial execution of the building's interior decoration.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty miles below the Arctic Circle on the banks of the Mackenzie River lies the small, isolated community of Fort Good Hope. On the outskirts of the settlement stands the Church of Our Lady of Good Hope (Figs. 2, 3). Begun in 1865 it was designed, built and decorated by the Oblate priests and brothers of the Roman Catholic mission who had aspired to build the most beautiful church in the Mackenzie district. They achieved their goal and today Our Lady of Good Hope is not only one of the oldest surviving churches in western Canada, but also one of the most remarkable examples of church decoration in Canada. Its importance to Canadian history is increased by its association with Father Émile Petitot (1838-1917) who was largely responsible for the design and much of the interior detail and who also earned international recognition for his pioneering studies on the geography and native cultures of the Canadian northwest (*see* the note below). In recognition of the historical and architectural importance of this building the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada designated the church a national historic site in 1977.

1 *The Mackenzie Basin. Like Fort Good Hope, almost all of the Oblate missions in the Mackenzie Basin in 1859 were situated at Hudson's Bay Company trading posts. In the 19th century the Mackenzie district included territory that now belongs to the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.*

ORIGINS OF FORT GOOD HOPE

Fort Good Hope was founded in 1804 as a fur trading post of the Northwest Company. Before the establishment of Fort McPherson nearer the Arctic Ocean in 1840 it was the most northerly outpost of the Northwest Company. Originally Fort Good Hope was situated 100 miles farther downstream (north) but in 1821, the year the Northwest Company was taken over by its rival, the Hudson's Bay Company, the fort was moved south to Manitou Island in the Mackenzie River. In 1836 it was again relocated a few miles south to its present location at the junction of the Hare Indian and Mackenzie rivers.

THE OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE

In 1859 the Hudson's Bay Company invited the Oblate fathers to establish a mission at Fort Good Hope. The Oblates of Mary Immaculate were a missionary order of the Roman Catholic church founded in 1816 in France at Aix-en-Provence by Charles Joseph Eugène Mazenod and given papal approval in 1826. Oblate missionaries were sent all over the world but Canada was a major focus of their activities. In 1841 the first Oblate mission was established in Bytown (Ottawa) where it set up a college in 1846, now the University of Ottawa. From Bytown Oblate priests moved up the Ottawa Valley and into the Hudson Bay area. In 1845 Bishop Provencher asked them to set up missions in the Canadian northwest. The Oblates were one of the first religious organizations to penetrate the remote Mackenzie Basin and they were certainly the most successful. The earliest Oblate missions were founded in 1849 at the Hudson's Bay posts at Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca and at Fort Simpson on the Mackenzie River. They quickly expanded their domain with a new mission at Fond du Lac (Saskatchewan) and a mission near what is now Fort McMurray (Alberta) in 1853, and missions at Fort Norman in 1856 and Forts Providence and Resolution in 1858 (Fig. 1).

FOUNDING THE MISSION

The mission at Fort Good Hope was established in 1859 by Father Henri Grollier who had been stationed at Fort Chipewyan since 1852. Grollier was a most zealous and energetic priest but he had little talent when it came to temporal matters. He devoted most of his time to travelling to remote areas of the district attempting to convert the Indians to Christianity but he made no effort to establish permanent mission facilities. During his first years he lived inside the fort in a poorly constructed cabin that was said to offer only a minimal protection from the elements. Unfortunately, these long journeys and his poor living conditions ruined Grollier's health and he was soon too weak to carry out his duties alone. In 1861 Brother Joseph Patrick Kearney and Father Jean Séguin were sent to Fort Good Hope to assist him. Grollier never fully recovered and died at the mission in June 1864. In August 1864 Father Émile Petitot, who had left France for Canada in 1862, arrived to replace him.

BUILDING THE CHURCH

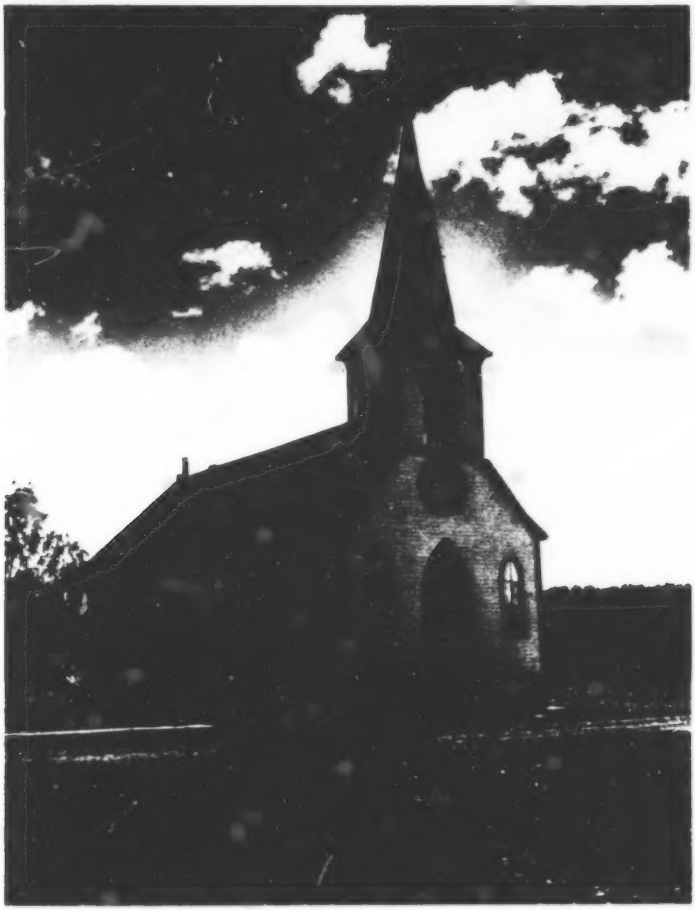
The idea of building a church is said to have originated with Father Séguin and Brother Kearney in 1863 but no action was taken until the summer of 1864 soon after the arrival of Father Petitot who was the driving force behind this project. Petitot acted as the designer and Séguin, the most competent builder of the group, was responsible for most of the detailed woodwork. Brother Kearney was assigned the more menial tasks, such as squaring the timbers and sawing the planks for the sheathing. By 1864 Petitot had completed the plans and they began the arduous task of cutting lumber and hauling it to the site by dog sled. Two natives and four servants from the Hudson's Bay post assisted them but, given the harsh winter climate, the short winter days and the little time that could be spared from the priests' religious duties, construction did not begin until 1865. The basic structure was completed in 1876.

The design of Our Lady of Good Hope is typical of Roman Catholic mission churches of the Canadian northwest in the 19th century. The walls employ a mortise and tenon frame which is a structural system composed of a series of widely spaced upright timbers joined by horizontal logs slotted into these posts. Originally only the west or main façade was sheathed with vertical planking, but in the early 20th century the remaining walls received an outer cladding of horizontal boards. Measuring 45 feet by 20 feet (approx. 13.5 m x 6 m), the church has a steeply pitched roof, gabled at the front and hipped at the rear, and a tall central steeple. In 1877, just after the church was completed, a 20-foot rear addition (approx. 6 m) was built to accommodate the growing congregation. The façade features a central Gothic-arched doorway with a rose window above and two Gothic windows on either side (Fig. 4). Five similar windows punctuate each side of the building.

Although the plan conforms to a standard format, the intricate tracery of the rose and lancet windows, carved by Séguin after patterns drawn by Petitot, far surpass anything known in this remote area. According to Petitot, his designs were inspired by Chartres Cathedral in France. Although his statement should not be taken literally, clearly Petitot has tried to imitate medieval architectural details. The ornate gables applied to the spire (since removed) and the rows of crochets along the eave and spire resemble the stone ornaments found on the large Gothic cathedrals of France. Unfortunately, the steeple was altered in the 1930s and much of the original ornamentation was removed.

INTERIOR DESIGN

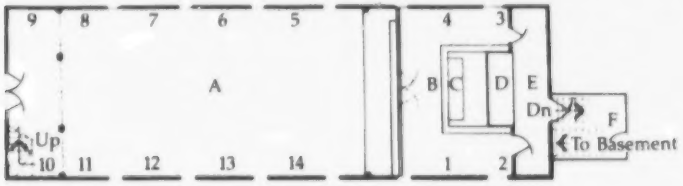
Despite these few decorative flourishes, the exterior of the church is relatively modest in character and provides no hint of its dazzling interior (Figs. 5, 6), lavishly decorated in the Gothic style. Every surface is covered with intricately carved woodwork, painted ornamentation and panels of biblical scenes and figures executed in vivid, sparkling colours. Just inside the main door, between the entrance hall and the nave, stands a carved wooden screen (the tribune arch) composed of a central pointed arch



2 *Contemporary view of Church of Our Lady of Good Hope. Except for a new steeple, the church has not changed since the 1870s.* (Heritage Recording Services, Parks Canada)

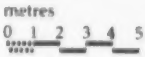
3 *Aerial view of Church of Our Lady of Good Hope. The mission house is at the left. The cross, which was first raised in 1864, an event depicted in one of Father Bernard Browne's panels in the church, can be seen in front of the church.* (Heritage Recording Services, Parks Canada)

4 *This early view of the church shows the original steeple as designed by Father Petitot. When the steeple was rebuilt in the 1920s, the paired Gothic windows in the base of the steeple, the decorative gables and the rows of crochets along the eave and spire were eliminated.* (Public Archives Canada, PA 45085)



Ground Floor Plan

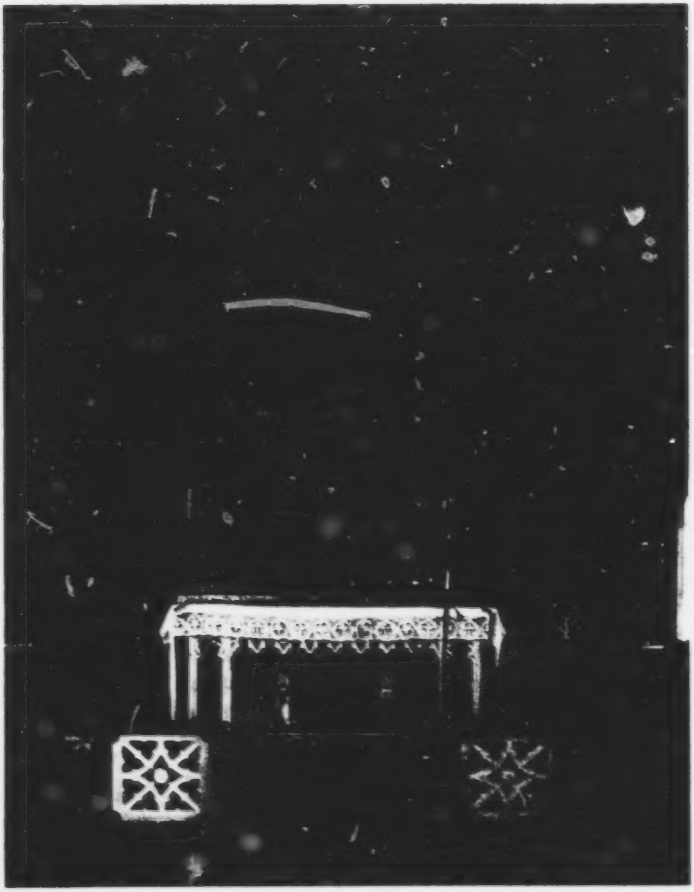
Gallery



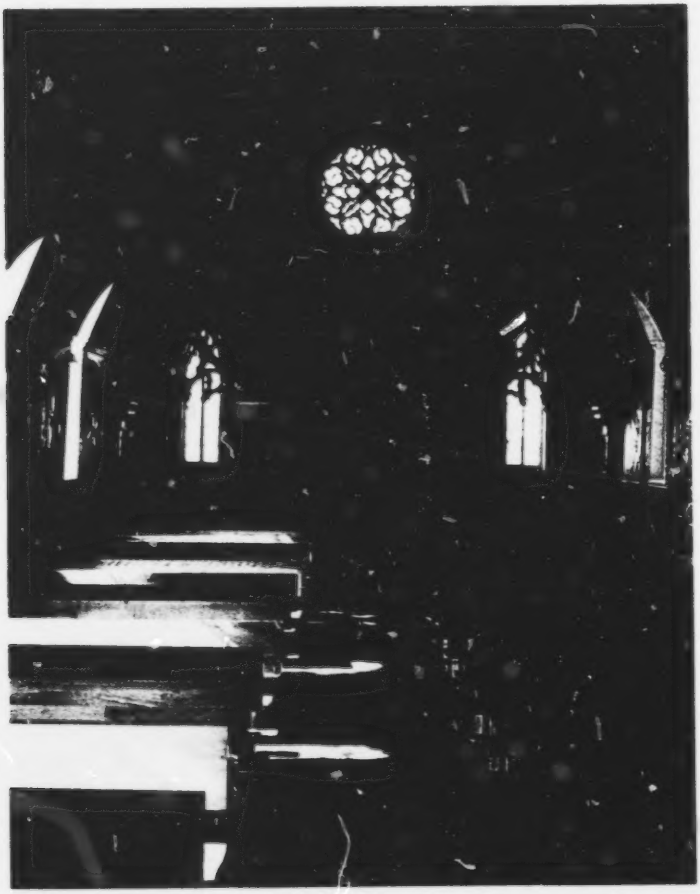
A Nave
B Chancel
C Altar
D Retable
E Sacristy
F Stairway
G Gallery

1 *Our Lady of Good Hope*
2 *Saint Paul*
3 *Saint Peter*
4 *The Nativity*
5 *The Annunciation*
6 *The Presentation at the Temple*
7 *The Flight into Egypt*
8 *The Miracle of the Lame Man*
9 *Apparition of the Virgin*
10 *Father Grollier on his Death Bed*
11 *Road to Calvary*
12 *The Crucifixion*
13 *The Entombment of Christ*
14 *The Annointment of Christ*

5 *Plan of Church of Our Lady of Good Hope indicating the decorative elements.* (Heritage Recording Services, Parks Canada)

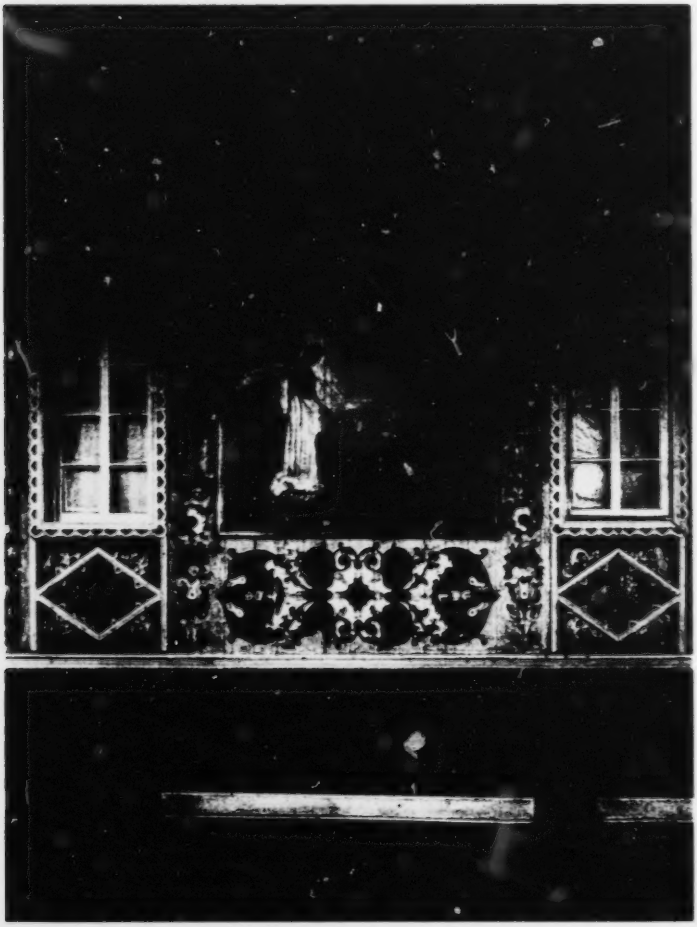


6 *Father Petitot's communion table and altar and Brother Ancel's retable in the chancel.* (Heritage Recording Services, Parks Canada)



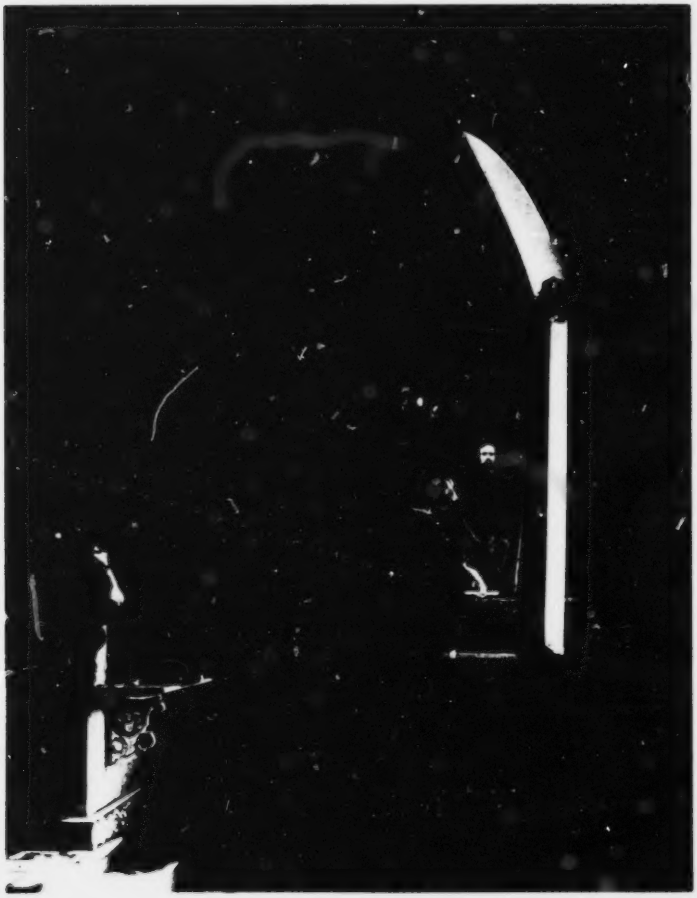
7 *The tribune arch at the west end of the church was designed by Petitot, carved by Father Séguin and largely painted by Father Ducot.* (Heritage Recording Services, Parks Canada)

8 *Altar designed and decorated by Father Petitot which he said was completed in 1872.* (Heritage Recording Services, Parks Canada)

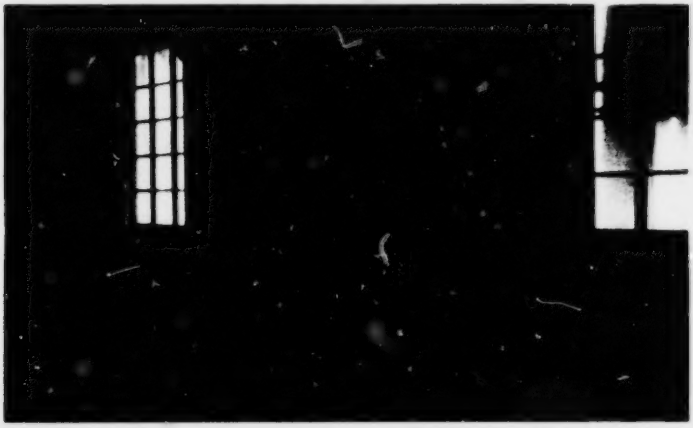


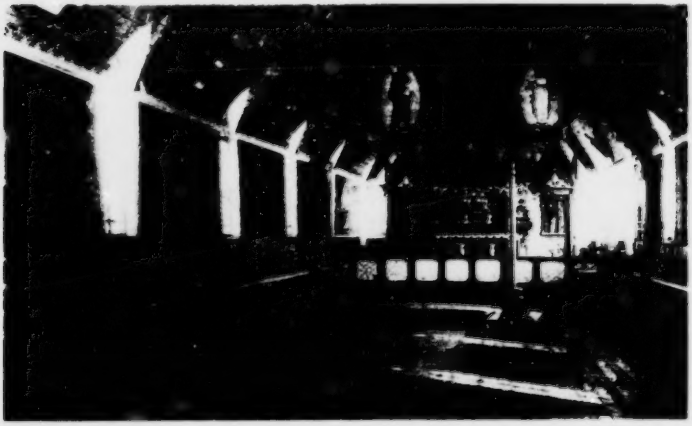
9 The Annunciation, *painted by Father Jean Colas in 1941, was one of the first panels to be painted after the departure of Brother Ancel in 1885. The borderwork is by Father Petitot.* (Heritage Recording Services, Parks Canada)

10 The Presentation of the Infant Jesus at the Temple *is one of the panels painted under the direction of Father Binamé. The marginal decoration and the diamond-shaped panels under the windows illustrate Father Petitot's work in the Italian style.* (Heritage Recording Services, Parks Canada)



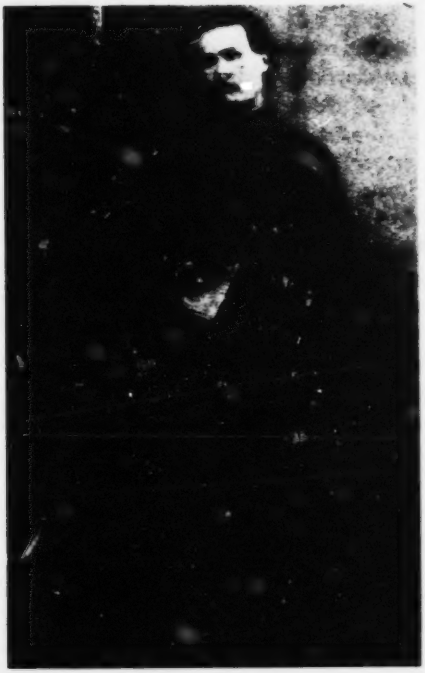
11 *Brother Ancel's skill as a woodworker is evident in his handling of the sacristy doors. The placing of the green pilasters against the red trim, both elements painted to imitate marble, illustrates Ancel's vibrant sense of colour for which he was famous. The figure of Saint Paul with his sword and the adoring angel (upper left) were also products of Ancel's brush.* (Heritage Recording Services, Parks Canada)





12 Our Lady of Good Hope. *In its effective handling of an unusual subject matter, this panel by Brother Ancel is the most outstanding individual work within the church.* (Heritage Recording Services, Parks Canada)

13 *Interior of Church of Our Lady of Good Hope in the 1920s when none of the illustrative panels along the nave had been completed.* (Public Archives Canada, C 7169)



14 *Father Petitot before leaving France for Canada in 1862.* (Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa)

flanked by two smaller ogee arches which have been infilled with delicate tracery painted white and marked by thin black lines to resemble marble (Fig. 7). The arches are supported by square posts richly coloured in imitation of inlaid tile. This screen visually divides the plan into a central nave with two side aisles, a spatial organization reinforced by a similar screen located at the other end of the church between the nave and the chancel. The straight-gable roof of the exterior has been transformed in the interior into a curved vault painted pale blue and dotted with gold stars. The focus of the interior is the magnificient altar and retable, the decorative structure that stands behind the actual altar, carved and decorated in the Gothic style.

The decoration of Our Lady of Good Hope represents the labours of many missionary fathers who worked under harsh and demanding conditions over many decades but it was Father Émile Petitot who instigated this ambitious project and who laid out the overall decorative scheme. Petitot aspired to create a building that would not only glorify the church but also inspire awe and wonder in the local population. To paraphrase an 1870 remark by Petitot, he wanted to astound the natives and to give them an exalted idea of his religion. Petitot, a man of learning with an extensive knowledge of the fine arts and an artist of considerable skill and originality, was well equipped to carry out his plan. His work set the standard of excellence for those who followed.

Petitot's first project and his most original contribution to the enrichment of the church was the altar or altar tomb (Fig. 8). It is ornately decorated with Gothic tracery and features five painted and carved angels which appear to support the top of the altar and partially screen a painted panel of the body of Christ. This work reveals Petitot's creative and unconventional imagination. In the Roman Catholic church the sacrament of the Eucharist or Holy Communion is consecrated at the altar and it is, therefore, regarded as both the presence of Christ and a renewal of His sacrifice. The typical 19th-century altar was an enclosed table usually richly decorated with gilt abstract or symbolic forms. Petitot abandoned standard decorative conventions. By clearly depicting the body of Christ on the altar he made the meaning and purpose of the altar and the Eucharist visually explicit. Petitot wanted his work not only to inspire awe but also to instruct his

potential converts, who neither read nor spoke the language of the mission fathers, in the sacraments of the Catholic church.

Petitot also designed and built the communion table (the Gothic railing in front of the altar) but he was unable to complete it. By 1873 Petitot's health was failing. He briefly took up residence at one of the more southerly missions and in 1874 was sent back to France to recuperate. He was replaced temporarily by Father Xavier Ducot, who had some talent with the brush. During Petitot's absence Ducot continued to work on some of the simpler decorative work, such as painting the communion table and the tribune arch.

Petitot returned in 1876 and immediately began to work on the decoration of the walls. He laid out ten panels that were to be filled in with biblical scenes. He never had the opportunity to finish the panels but he did complete, perhaps with the help of Ducot, their decorative borders. These painted frames, composed of arabesque motifs with curving vine-like forms entwined around cherubs, birds and Sacred Hearts, and diamond-shaped panels under the windows depicting clusters of fruits, are the most technically polished examples of Petitot's work (Figs. 9, 10). According to Petitot these ornaments were designed in the Italian style and were based on patterns that he had brought from France. Petitot had probably been inspired by the marginal decorations found in illuminated manuscripts of 15th- and 16th-century Italy which strongly resemble the naturalistic forms and warm colours of Petitot's designs. To make his work more immediate to his congregation he incorporated local birds — white partridges and snow buntings — and he tried to give his cherubs the round faces and dark complexions of North American Indian children.

Father Petitot never regained his health and in 1878 he was forced to return to France. On his departure the church was far from complete but his work was carried on between 1883 and 1885 by Brother Julien Ancel who proved himself not only equal to Petitot's artistic talent but a highly skilled builder and cabinetmaker as well. Unlike Petitot, who gave first priority to his priestly duties, Brother Ancel's main occupation in the northwest was to build and decorate Oblate churches and mission houses. Ancel was in great demand throughout the district and during his

19 years in the Arctic (1880-99) he worked on the construction and decoration of several buildings in the area. The church at Fort Good Hope is the best and one of the few surviving examples of his work.

Ancel's talent as a woodworker is evident in his design of the retable and in the carved trim around the sacristy doors (Fig. 11). Ancel's work continues the Gothic theme but the delicate quality of his tracery and the intricacy of his forms seen in the columns around the doors and in the carved heads in the niche that contains the statue of the Virgin are in contrast to the slightly heavier detail by Petitot. Ancel was also noted for his distinctive handling of colour. Whereas Petitot seemed to prefer softer tones, Ancel loved rich deep hues and the sharp contrasts created by juxtaposing complimentary colours. The green pilasters of the sacristy doors set against a red background creates a dazzling effect typical of Ancel's style.

According to a letter of 1885, Brother Ancel also painted the two adoring angels on either side of the statue of the Virgin, the panels of Saint Peter and Saint Paul on the east wall, and the three panels on the chancel arch depicting Christ on the cross, Joseph and Mary. He was also responsible for the two large biblical panels in the chancel, one of which depicts the Nativity and the other a scene in the Garden of Eden that could be most appropriately entitled *Our Lady of Good Hope* (Fig. 12). Nothing is known of Ancel's training or background, but his work reflects a mature and confident style. *Our Lady of Good Hope* is his most accomplished piece. The panel portrays the Virgin Mary accompanied by the Holy Trinity (God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost) descending from Heaven on a beam of light towards the cowering figures of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Two angels are shown driving the devil, in the form of a dragon, from the garden. It is a dynamic and tightly structured composition that revolves around the figure of the Virgin. Her hand is outstretched towards Adam and Eve and her swirling robes direct the eye toward the avenging angels. The entire scene is given an almost mystical, supernatural atmosphere by the brilliance and

clarity of Ancel's colour and the stylized treatment of the surrounding vegetation. There is no attempt to create a sense of real space. Instead each element stands out in sharp relief against a pale neutral background.

What is most exceptional about this painting is its subject matter. Although it represents Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, it does not depict the more familiar and unhappier theme of their original sin and their fall from grace. Instead Ancel has compiled a curious blend of Old and New Testament themes and characters in which the Virgin Mary presents herself to the shamed Adam and Eve to offer them the promise of redemption represented by the Holy Trinity. This image gives meaning to the church's name, "Our Lady of Good Hope," and it also demonstrates the artist's wish to reinforce the idea of Christianity as a religion of hope and salvation rather than one of despair and punishment.

After the departure of Brother Ancel from Fort Good Hope in 1885, work on the decoration stopped. The chancel was complete and the tribune and chancel arches were painted but the panels laid out by Petitot remained blank (Fig. 13). Not until the early 1930s was the work continued when *The Entombment of Christ* was painted by Father Gabriel Houssais. In 1941 Father Jean Colas painted *The Annunciation* (Fig. 9). The remaining panels in the nave are said to have been completed under the direction of Father Antoine Binamé, who served in the Mackenzie from the 1920s until the 1960s. These scenes, illustrating *The Presentation at the Temple, The Flight into Egypt, The Miracle of the Lame Man, The Road to Calvary, The Crucifixion* and *The Anointment of Christ*, are said to be based on works in the cathedral at Antwerp, Belgium. In 1957 Father Bernard Browne painted two additional panels located on the side walls under the tribune arch. These two most recent additions to the church decor depict *Father Grollier on his Death Bed* witnessing the raising of the cross at Fort Good Hope and an *Apparition of the Virgin* on the cliffs above Fort Good Hope.

CONCLUSION

The Church of Our Lady of Good Hope set a precedent in interior design for mission churches throughout the Mackenzie district. When Bishop Grouard saw the church in 1889 he was very impressed. He referred to it as a "petit bijou" (little jewel) and wrote of his amazement at finding here, under the Arctic Circle, a decoration so rich, so elegant and so varied.

Following his visit Bishop Grouard initiated several decorative schemes of his own which included the churches at Fort Chipewyan and at Dunvegan in Alberta. Both these buildings, now demolished, were decorated in a more conventional and traditional manner featuring painted panels of saints and apostles isolated in a framework of classical architectural motifs. Although technically refined, none could match the decoration of Our Lady of Good Hope for its intricacy of form, sparkling colours and originality of thought.

The Church of Our Lady of Good Hope reflects the aspirations of the mission fathers, particularly of Father Petitot who initiated the project, to build the most beautiful church in the Mackenzie. Given the remote location, the scarcity of materials and the harshness of their living conditions, the completion of the church and its ambitious decoration is an impressive feat. The talent and determination of Father Émile Petitot and Brother Julien Ancel brought the dream to reality.

FATHER ÉMILE PETITOT
(1838-1917)

Father Petitot was born in France in 1838 and in 1860 he entered the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. In 1862, the year he was ordained, he left for Canada to take up his first post at Fort Providence on Great Slave Lake. In 1864 he was sent to Fort Good Hope to replace Father Henri Grollier who had died. During his residency at Fort Good Hope Petitot travelled extensively throughout the Mackenzie Basin visiting established missions and scouting sites for new ones. These arduous journeys broke Petitot's health and in 1873 he was sent to a more southerly mission at Lac La Biche, Alberta. In 1874 he left for France to recuperate. He returned to Fort Good Hope in 1876 but never having fully regained his strength, he was forced to give up missionary work in 1878. Between 1879 and 1883 he remained in Canada, travelling in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Quebec. In 1883 he returned to France where he eventually left the order and became a parish priest in Mareuil-les-Meaux. He died in 1917.

During Petitot's travels he gathered extensive information, drew many sketches and compiled maps of the people, culture and geography of the Canadian northwest. His subsequent publications on the subject earned him international renown as an anthropologist, geographer and explorer. He is best known for his published accounts of the Tchiglit Inuit, the Dene and the Algonkian people. He also compiled several dictionaries of the Inuit, Dene and Blackfoot languages. In the field of geography his map of the Canadian Arctic won him a silver medal from the *Société de Géographie de Paris*. He also published several descriptions of the Mackenzie Basin. In recognition of his contribution to science Petitot was awarded the Back Prize from the Royal Geographical Society of Great Britain in 1883. Petitot was also notable for his pioneer defense of the theory of the Asiatic origins of the North American native peoples, a crucial thesis in terms of Christian doctrine, as it meant that they could be included within the common race of man that descended from Adam and Eve.

In 1975 the Canadian government unveiled a plaque to Emile Petitot at Mareuil-les-Meaux, France.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Father Gaston Carrière, O.M.I., for his help in preparing this booklet. His unpublished manuscript on the history of the Church of Our Lady of Good Hope formed the basis of this work.

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